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## **Target Selection and Symbolism**

### **Why the Twin Trade Towers were targeted and what can we expect in the future.**

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Although it is easy to understand why the terrorist action of September 11, 2001, targeted the Pentagon, the reasons for the attacks against the Twin Trade Towers in New York City are not quite as obvious to Americans, who tend to think in terms of a dichotomy between military and civilian targets. Even the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City was different. Although civilians and children were killed in that attack, the building itself belonged to the government and housed a number of Federal offices as well as law enforcement agencies. In contrast, the Twin Trade Tower attacks, both in 1993 and in 2001, were planned and carried out specifically against civilian targets. Why would civilian structures and individuals be chosen in addition to military or government centers?

The answer is found in the extraordinary use of symbolism by terrorist organizations. Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (2001) defines a symbol as "something that stands for or suggests something else; especially: a visible sign of something invisible."

The use of symbolism in armed struggle has been extremely effective historically both as motivation for one's own forces and to instill fear in one's enemy. Employed in this manner, symbolism ranged from the use of blue body paint by the Picts against the Romans (later used by the Scots against the English as shown in the movie "Braveheart"), to the carrying of regimental flags in battle until the beginning of the twentieth century. The playing of bagpipes during battle in the thirteenth century was as effective in the creation of fear as were the famous "Rebel Yells" of the Confederate soldiers during the Civil War.

Terrorists use symbols both to communicate and to produce fear:

... [T]he terrorist needs to publicize his attack. If no one knows about it, it will not produce fear. The need for publicity often drives target selection; the greater the symbolic value of the target, the more publicity the attack brings to the terrorists and the more fear it generates. [\(1\)](#)

Terrorists are not "ordinary people" and do not think or act like "ordinary people." This is particularly true in the area of communication and symbolism. Targets are symbols to terrorists and acts of terrorism are often used as a form of communication. Frequently, however, the symbolism and communication are so obscure that the message is lost on the intended audience.

The Unabomber case provides an extreme example of lost symbolism and communication. Ted Kaczynski, also known through the FBI's symbolic code name, "Unabomber," publicized his actions in September, 1995, and demanded media publication of his "manifesto," a 35,000 word rambling document which railed against technology and industrial society. The difficulty with his efforts at communication lay in the fact that almost no one understood his point in writing the document or what he hoped to accomplish in having it published.

In the case of the recent attacks against the Pentagon and Twin Trade Towers (code named "PENTTBOM" for Pentagon/Twin Trade/bomb), the Twin Trade Towers were most likely chosen because of their representation, at least in the eyes of the terrorists, of the City of New York and thus of the United States. Although Americans in general may not think of New York as symbolic of the United States, foreigners have always considered it in that light, and due to the domination of the New York skyline by the Towers, this would have been, for them, a strike at the very heart of America. The Towers also would have represented such American ideals as strength, achievement, financial stability, capitalism and even democracy itself.

But what about the argument that the United States should not have been targeted because it was an ally to the Arab world in its struggle with the despot, Saddam Hussein? Osama bin Laden considered this to be an act of turning Saudi Arabia into "an American colony" [\(2\)](#) and it only fueled his hatred. In fact, he is the only terrorist leader to have formally declared a "jihad" (holy war) against the United States. [\(3\)](#)

A follower of Osama bin Laden, El Sayyid Nosair (arrested in 1990 for murdering Rabbi Meir Kahane in New York) wrote the following words in his notebook:

We have to thoroughly demoralize the enemies of God... by means of destroying and blowing up the towers that constitute the pillars of their civilization, such as the tourist attractions and the high buildings of which they are so proud. [\(4\)](#)

It was only later (after the 1993 Tower bombing) that these prophetic words were found in his papers. They are as applicable today as they were at the time. So not only were the Towers symbols of capitalism, they were considered the very pillars on which the structure of (the evil) American culture stood. The reference to the "pillars of their civilization" would have great significance, as contrasted with the "five pillars of Islam," (profession of faith, prayer, almsgiving, fasting and pilgrimage) the essential religious duties required of every adult Muslim.

Nor is the superpower status of the United States a deterrent to their actions. Following the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan, the radical Islamic groups have become emboldened, understanding that they are on a holy mission from Allah to eliminate the infidels. [\(5\)](#) In 1994, a PBS film entitled "Jihad in America" outlined a network of radical Islamic groups operating throughout the United States, including operatives of Osama bin Laden. Besides raising funds

and support for their operations, the groups repeatedly called for the waging of “jihad” in America.

Even so, why would the Towers be attacked rather than, for example, the Statue of Liberty? Although the vast majority of Muslims would not ever consider the terrorist way, followers of radical Islamic fundamentalism have developed an intense hatred of the United States, fueled by a religious belief that the United States, being the “Great Satan,” must be destroyed as the chief enemy of Islam. Again, most Americans simply cannot fathom the depth of the religious fervor and the nature of “Jihad,” which does not seek to dissuade but to conquer, killing all who oppose the conversion to Islam. An attack on the Statue of Liberty would be of great significance, but there would be little loss of life, and only through the shedding of blood may the terrorist take a step toward the real goal - conquest.

**So we, as Americans, *are* the enemy.** We are not just targeted as allies of Israel; **we are *the* target**, and any strike at the very heart and soul of our nation is to be encouraged, funded and celebrated according to their religious zealotry. The killing of American citizens, as infidels, is desired by radical Muslims, not only as a means to instill fear but also as a method of eliminating the enemy of Islam. That is precisely why the Twin Trade Towers were targeted, both as symbolism and as the opening salvo of the first serious operation to conquer America.

So how, then, do we identify likely terrorist targets and even more important, how do we prevent terrorist actions in the future? Targets abound in the United States and certainly we cannot protect them all; however, the obvious civilian targets - power plants (including nuclear facilities and dams), financial/banking centers, communications centers and transportation systems (including pipelines) - should engage in systematic, heightened awareness for terrorist surveillance or activity, and analysts familiar with the philosophical views of radical Islam should advise appropriate authorities of potential symbolic targets.

Preventing further terrorist activity is problematic but possible if the anticipated United States response is to aggressively hunt terrorist groups wherever they may be located, thus keeping them off-balance and occupied with self-defense rather than engaged in offensive planning and action.

Other measures would include identifying, tracking and seizing financial and other assets belonging to the terrorists, as well as increased surveillance and penetration of groups now operating at home and abroad. Both of these measures are not viable options under current United States law; therefore, new legislation must be considered and passed so that law enforcement can do its job of protecting the home front.

President Bush said recently that this would be a long war. Given the extreme hatred, determination and resources of those who have begun it, he is probably right.

## Footnotes

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1. "Combating Terrorism," U.S. Army Field Manual, Stability and Support Operations, cited in "The Basics of Terrorism, Part One," *Terrorism Resource Center*, <<http://www.isuisse.com/emmaf/base/baster.html>> 5/20/00.

2. Yossef Bodansky, Bin Laden, (Rocklin, California: Prima Publishing, 1999), p. 190.
3. *Ibid*, p. ix.
4. Benjamin Netanyahu, Fighting Terrorism, (New York: The Noonday Press, 1995), p. 94.
5. *Ibid*, p. 97.

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